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What Would Vincent Study Abroad? Option for the Poor and Systemic Change for the Development of Socially Responsible Leaders

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This article considers the value and practices of the DePaul University School of Public Service (SPS) Chiapas Program in light of the Vincentian values of experiential learning, systemic change, and the option for the poor. The authors argue that service to community, along with exposure to poverty and promotion of social justice, should be the distinguishing marks of Vincentian study-abroad programs.

“Let us, my sisters, cherish the poor as our masters, since Our Lord is in them, and they are in Our Lord. Let us work with a new love in the service of the poor, looking for the most destitute and abandoned among them. Let us recognize that before God they are our lords and masters, and we are unworthy to render them our small services.” — Saint Vincent de Paul

“Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.” — Confucius

Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, is a rich land inhabited by poor people.¹ It is a unique and challenging context for learning about poverty, diversity, and social justice, and this is probably one of the main reasons why numerous academic institutions have programs in its highlands and forest.²

¹ Thomas Benjamin, *A Rich Land, a Poor People: Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

² DePaul University has two academic programs in Chiapas: The Law School Chiapas Practicum focuses on human rights, and the Public Service Study Abroad Program focuses on sustainable development and the role of nongovernmental organizations. The Harvard Chiapas

Since 2004, DePaul University's School of Public Service has been offering an annual short-term study-abroad program in Chiapas. The program centers on sustainable development through a carefully planned immersion experience in Mexico during the university's spring break. While many other American college students are vacationing in Cancun, these study-abroad students choose a difficult and challenging experience among impoverished Mayan indigenous populations. Thanks to the assistance of well-known leaders and trusted organizations, students come to recognize a different face of Mexico. They meet with internally displaced people, with survivors of a massacre in Acteal, and with communities involved in the Zapatista resistance. They learn about the ambiguities of globalization, the contradictions of development, and the complexities of a highly organized and culturally rich community. The students learn from the poor themselves, from civil organizations, and from the engaged leaders who work with them. The result is a life-changing experience that shapes students' future personal and professional choices. This is what some of them had to say after participating in the SPS Chiapas Program:³

The Chiapas experience has changed my view of what Mexico is about. All areas of injustice come into view here, whether social, political, or economic, but the fight of the people is very inspiring and allowed me to really see a many-sided reality — one with no easy answers.

This trip opened my eyes and allowed me to see the intersections between the government, private, and public sectors that we hear so much about in our classes. I would say that this program is nothing like anything else I have ever experienced in my life.

Having spent two semesters in Mexico as an undergrad, I thought I knew the culture and the people well. The Chiapas Program opened my eyes to a part of Mexico that I'd never seen — and probably couldn't have seen if I'd visited the region on my own.

Project, just to mention the most famous program, has been sending fieldwork researchers to Chiapas since 1957. See Evon Z. Vogt, *Bibliography of the Harvard Chiapas Project: The First Twenty Years, 1957-1977* (Cambridge: Harvard University, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1978).

³ This, and the following students' comments cited in this article, comes from the 2006 and 2007 Chiapas Program Evaluations. Students fill out course evaluations anonymously at the end of each immersion.

This program was truly something that I believe will help form some of my future decisions and direction. I have learned the importance of remaining open and preparing ourselves well. I came to know a world I didn't know existed. I was educated on topics I believe are relevant to everyone in the world (though many choose not to acknowledge this). I was inspired both by the people I met in Chiapas and by the people from DePaul. I was consistently challenged in every way imaginable and in a way that would be impossible not to have an impact.



DePaul students from the School of Public Service visiting the Kinal Atsetik Maya Women Cooperative in Chiapas, Mexico.

Photo courtesy of Marco Tavanti, Ph.D.

In the post-September 11 climate, study-abroad programs have increasingly been framed as important forms of experiential learning for recognizing cultural diversity and international inequalities.⁴ DePaul's School of Public Service (formerly the Management of Public Service Program) has been a leader in promoting short-term study abroad programs to educate young professionals in the values of Vincentian leadership and the paradigms of global citizenship.⁵ The general invitation to "learn outside the country" is accompanied by an emphasis on applied research and organizational management for nonprofit and public service. In line with the values

⁴ James L. Citron and Rachel Kline, "From Experience to Experiential Education: Taking Study Abroad Outside the Comfort Zone," *International Educator*, Vol. X, No. 4 (2001), 18-26.

⁵ One of the best introductions to the concepts and practices of global citizenship is Nigel Dower and John Williams, *Global Citizenship a Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

of experiential education, the goal of this study abroad program is not only to increase knowledge and skills but to challenge and transform cultural attitudes, learn from context, and engage in professional collaborations and constructive dialogues for social change.⁶

Impact Analysis of the Program

Numerous study-abroad programs have demonstrated how the benefits of experience, immersion, and cross-cultural contacts are beneficial to students and their value-based leadership development; but mere assertions of the pedagogical advantages are not enough.⁷ Most programs evaluate students' level of satisfaction and learning, but very few attempt to analyze the impact on social context, their leadership, and professional development.⁸ What are the assessment criteria and best practices indicators that lead SPS Chiapas Program students to characterize it as "an excellent program" and a "life-changing experience"?

System Thinking:

The SPS Chiapas Program begins with the assumption that system thinking is essential for developing transformative leaders and creative managers.⁹ Encountering the indigenous reality of poverty and marginalization forces students to rethink their assumptions about free-trade and neoliberal economies. Their meetings with indigenous and Chiapas-based Mexican and international organizations stimulate them to think about development alternatives centered on sustainability, participation, human dignity, and social justice. Their exposure to the Zapatista movement, with its hybrid of utopian thinking and concrete action, leads them to see how political, economic, and social change is possible.¹⁰

⁶ Most contemporary studies and reflections on experiential learning come from the works of John Dewey and David Kolb. See John Dewey, "Experience and education," *The Kappa Delta Pi lecture series*, No. 10 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1938); David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

⁷ A few schools and universities have attempted an impact evaluation of short-term and long-term study-abroad programs. See Michael Byram and Anwei Feng, *Living and Studying Abroad Research and Practice: Languages for Intercultural Communication and Education* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006).

⁸ Joan Gillespie, Larry Braskamp, and David Braskamp, "Evaluation and Study Abroad: Developing Assessment Criteria and Practices To Promote Excellence," *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 5:2 (Fall 1999), 101-27.

⁹ Michael C. Jackson, *Systems Thinking Creative Holism for Managers* (Chichester, England: J. Wiley, 2003). See also Peter Checkland, *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice* (Chichester, England: J. Wiley, 1981).

¹⁰ French sociologist Alan Touraine, among other famous people who went to "revolutionary" Chiapas for one of the International Encounters for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism,

Systemic Change:

Unlike numerous Chiapas programs that expose their participants to only one side of the multifaceted reality of the struggle in Chiapas, the SPS Program purposely exposes students to a diversity of organizations and perspectives.¹¹ This makes awareness of context the first step toward systemic change.¹² The notion of systemic change alludes to a system-wide alternation in which one part represents and has the potential to transform a whole system.¹³ The Vincentian Commission for Systemic Change, headed by Reverend Robert P. Maloney, C.M., identifies it as a fundamental component in the Vincentian way of serving the poor while seeking to transform the root causes of poverty.¹⁴ According to the commission, three elements characterize a "Vincentian way" of effectively reducing poverty and promoting systemic change: 1) helping the poor to identify needs, planning, implementation, and evaluation; 2) maintaining an holistic vision of human, spiritual, psychological, and material needs; and 3) emphasizing self-help groups and sustainable development programs.¹⁵ The SPS Chiapas Program teaches students a Vincentian perspective by exposing them to the Zapatistas' effective strategies of fostering change through encounters and campaigns for indigenous people and international civil society.¹⁶

revisited his post-industrial assumptions when he met with Subcomandante Marcos, the sociologist on horseback, and the indigenous and global movement he represents. See Tom Hayden, *The Zapatista Reader* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), 388-389.

¹¹ The study abroad programs of the Mexico Solidarity Network and the Global Exchange Reality Tours in Chiapas, just to mention a few, expose their participants only to the Zapatista perspectives. The SPS Chiapas Program meets also with the board of directors (junta de buen gobierno) of a Zapatista Caracol, but also with civil-society organizations, government representatives, church ministers, and business representatives.

¹² See Beverly L. Anderson, "The Stages of Systemic Change," at <http://insites.org/documents/systemic.pdf>.

¹³ Arne Collen, *Systemic Change Through Praxis and Inquiry* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 17-20.

¹⁴ Systemic change is a weekly feature at the website of the Vincentian Family [<http://famvin.org>], and it will also be the focus of its leadership and larger gatherings for the next two years. See <http://famvin.org/en/archive/vincentian-family-gathering-for-systemic-change-in-new-orleans>.

¹⁵ These and other best practices and effective strategies for systemic change will be included in an upcoming book authored by the members of the Commission for the Promotion of Systemic Change: Robert Maloney, C.M.; Norberto Carcellar, C.M.; Ellen Flynn, D.C.; Joseph Foley, C.M.; Patricia Nava, A.I.C.; Pedro Opeka, C.M.; and Gene Smith, SSVP. *Seeds of Hope, Stories of Systemic Change* (Forthcoming). For more about the ongoing work of the commission, see the presentation given by Patricia de Nava at the Vincentian Family Gathering: Acting Together Against Poverty and Its Causes, San Francisco, CA, 2007. Available at <http://famvin.org/en/archive/systemic-change-and-the-vincentian-family-patricia-de-nava>.

¹⁶ Thomas Olesen, *International Zapatismo the Construction of Solidarity in the Age of Globalization* (London: Zed, 2005).



Cathedral of Santo Domingo in San Cristobal, the church where the famous defender of indigenous rights, Bishop Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas was preaching in 1544.

Photo courtesy of Marco Tavanti, Ph.D.

Option for the Poor:

Vincent de Paul reflected the evangelical option for the poor by founding institutions and charities dedicated to poverty alleviation. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, options for the poor are probably the single most important contribution of the Latin-American church to the world.¹⁷ In Chiapas, it translated into the San Cristobal de Las Casas Diocese's clear pastoral choice to work for and with the impoverished and marginalized indigenous communities of the highlands and Lacandon forest.¹⁸ Under the leadership of Monsignor Samuel Ruiz Garcias (now bishop emeritus of Chiapas), what had once been a conservative colonial church became a beacon of hope and prophecy in the defense of indigenous rights which had been initiated 500 years earlier in those very same lands by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.¹⁹ The SPS Chiapas Program participants get to know indigenous and human rights or-

¹⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, "Renewing the Option of the Poor," in David B. Batstone, *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity, and the Americas* (London: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁸ Marco Tavanti, *Las Abejas: Pacifist Resistance and Syncretic Identity in a Globalizing Chiapas* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁹ Bartolomé de las Casas and Stafford Poole, C.M., *In Defense of the Indians; the Defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, Late Bishop of Chiapas, Against the Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974).

ganizations which have emerged from the pastoral work of the diocese. Many of these students revisit their understanding and experience of faith by listening to the testimonies of progressive pastoral workers committed to the cause of the poor. They meet with survivors of the 1997 Acteal massacre who, in spite of their sufferings were able to reorganize themselves, demand justice, and create fair-trade coffee cooperatives.²⁰ Although every participant comes with their own unique background and sensitivity to people in poverty, the Chiapas Program challenges them to see, meet, and experience poverty firsthand. To further emphasize the pedagogical and Vincentian value of visiting the poor, the currently-in-development undergraduate program in Chiapas will include service-learning immersion with the Daughters of Charity who run the San Carlos Hospital in Ocosingo, in the Lacandon forest of Chiapas.²¹

Indigenous Knowledge:

A local coordinator, in dialogue with the instructor, works to develop the program's initiatives and itinerary for each year. This is essential in facilitating the beneficial impact of this short-term program. The SPS Chiapas Program does more than focus on experiential learning; it involves students in the activities of Chiapan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), indigenous organizations, and Mexican academic institutions. The NGO panels, along with symposiums and conferences promoted by DePaul in collaboration with other Chiapas-based universities, expose students to the intellectual world of Chiapas. The carefully planned partnerships and collaborations aim to facilitate dialogue between NGOs, universities, and indigenous community organizations. Service-learning and community partnerships, two highly respected values and practices in Vincentian higher education, are relatively new concepts among Mexican institutions that have not perceived education and research in a collaborative and action-oriented way. While competition and lack of collaboration is also visible among Catholic and Vincentian universities in the U.S., the open wounds of the conflict in Chiapas make it especially difficult to create a culture of academic dialogue and community collaboration. DePaul University promoted the First International Conference on Development on 28 March 2007, in collaboration with Universidad de la Tierra (UNITIERRA-CIDESI), Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas (UNACH), Universidad Nacional

²⁰ The Maya Vinic Fair Trade Coffee Cooperative, created a year after the Acteal massacre, received the prestigious 2001 French Government Human Rights Award for responding to violence by seeking a positive nonviolent solution.

²¹ The Daughters of Charity's health service to the indigenous poor in Chiapas, who were also members or sympathizers of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN)), the armed but mostly nonviolent segment of the Zapatista movement, made them a target of counterinsurgency operations following the 1994 uprising.

Autónoma de México in Chiapas (UNAM-PROIMMSE), and the Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH). The success that emerged from the active participation of more than 200 academics, NGO leaders, Zapatista leaders, and representatives of civil-society organizations was largely due to the respected work of our Chiapas coordinator, Marina Patricia Jiménez.²²

Local/Global Connections:

Chiapas is a unique place for the study of globalization from above (represented in large part by the effects of free-trade economies) and from below (represented by international civil society). It also provides an excellent context for understanding border issues, cultural diversity, and indigenous rights. The connections between Chicago and Chiapas are numerous, and the SPS Chiapas Program allows participants to recognize the many Chicago-based organizations that have ties to Chiapas. They are also exposed to many Chicago-based Mexican organizations that have projects in Chiapas, members who immigrated from Chiapas, or those that simply sympathize with the struggle of its indigenous people. Mexican-American students, in particular, realize the many parallels that exist between the discrimination against Mexican people in the U.S. and that against indigenous people in Mexico. Discovering the indigenous face of Mexico in Chiapas helps one to appreciate the diversity of immigrant communities in the United States, and their struggles. The Chicago-Chiapas connections are also important for answering the fundamental question that emerges after every study-abroad program: Now what? TSPS alumni have attempted to answer this question by forming ChiapanECHO, a student nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion of fair trade. In 2004 ChiapanECHO organized the Another World Conference at DePaul, which hosted leaders of indigenous organizations and women's cooperatives.²³ More recently, in collaboration with Latino organizations in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago and the Latin American and Latino Studies Program at DePaul University, SPS Chiapas Program alumni raised funds to buy land for a new high school in Nuevo Yibeljoj — a relocation site for internally displaced people. Students responded to this need after visiting the community and learning about the primary importance of education in local development and poverty reduction.

²² Lic. Marina Patricia Jiménez is the former executive director of the diocesan Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center (FrayBa), she is a well known and highly respected leader who played a major role in the defense of indigenous rights during the most challenging year of paramilitary assaults and military repression in Chiapas.

²³ Invited participants to the 22 October 2004 conference included women leaders from Kinal Antzetik A.C. (Tierra de Mujeres), an indigenous organization with strong ties with Mayaworks, a Chicago-based organization in partnership with DePaul University's Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning and Community Service Studies.

Alumni of the SPS Chiapas Program acquire and exhibit other strengths and unique features. These include the leadership responsibilities assigned to each student based on his or her skills and interests, the emphasis on teamwork reflecting the collective culture of indigenous organizations, and the readings and preparatory classes which precede the trip to Chiapas.²⁴ The effectiveness of the program is also demonstrated by the students who decide to return to Chiapas for internships with NGOs focused upon human rights and development.

Education Abroad is Not Enough

According to the 2007 Open Doors report, published annually by the Institute of International Education, about 8.5 percent of U.S. students chose to study abroad in 2006 — many more than in previous years.²⁵ The number of students receiving academic credit for their study abroad grew more than 150 percent from fewer than 90,000 students in 1995 and 1996.²⁶ Although more students have chosen nontraditional destinations in recent years, the large majority of study-abroad destinations are still in European countries. In *Education Abroad is Not Enough*, Karen Jenkins and James Skelly are critical not only of the relatively low rates of study abroad, but also of the types of such programs that predominate in U.S. higher education.²⁷ An intentional focus on teaching social justice, along with a direct experience to poverty, is essential for developing global citizens who can promote democracy and peace with justice and dignity.²⁸ In other words, if study-abroad programs, especially those in Vincentian institutions of higher education, are to be effective in developing socially responsible leaders for an increasingly globalized society, they need to focus more explicitly on exposing students to local and global poverty, along with promising alternatives for social justice and systemic change. The objectives of study abroad should therefore be not only to increase students' knowledge and skills, but also to develop their

²⁴ Marco Tavanti, Tim Winkler, and Cindy Gunderson, "Study Abroad for Sustainable Development: Building Networks between American Universities and Mexican NGOs," paper presented at The 33rd Annual Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Associations (ARNOVA) Conference, "The Meanings and Motives of Philanthropy: Responding to the Need of a Diverse Society" (Los Angeles, CA: 18-20 November 2004).

²⁵ The Institute for International Education 2007 Open Doors Report, available at www.open-doors.iienetwork.org.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Karen Jenkins and James Skelly, "Education Abroad is Not Enough," *International Educator* (Winter 2004), 6-12.

²⁸ "Democracia, justicia y libertad" and "Paz, justicia y dignidad" are respectively the mottos of the Zapatistas and the civil-society organization Las Abejas.

personal values in alignment with their professional career choices.

Exposure to poverty, reflection of systems, and active involvement in societal change are some of the essential ingredients for developing socially responsible leaders.²⁹ Paulo Freire's well-known pedagogical advocacy of critical thinking about reality reminds us how study-abroad programs could be designed as effective experiential learning opportunities to bring about systemic change.³⁰ The SPS Chiapas Program reflects both Freire's innovative insights into the pedagogy of liberation and Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the intersection of culture with politico-economic systems.³¹ Systemic political, economic, and social change requires pedagogical steps for raising awareness while exploring new paradigms and attempting to adapt them into specific contexts. According to Thomas Maak and Micola M. Pless, the development of responsible leaders requires the integration of individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal values.³² The SPS Chiapas Program helps to achieve this through intense international exposure to poverty, along with an exploration of systemic change.



Mural symbolizing indigenous knowledge in an autonomous Zapatista school in the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico.
Photo courtesy of Marco Tavanti, Ph.D.

²⁹ Thomas Maak and Nicolas Pless, *Responsible Leadership* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

³⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). See also: Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation Dialogues on Transforming Education* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987).

³¹ Antonio Gramsci and Joseph A. Buttigieg, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). See also Carmel Borg, Joseph A. Buttigieg, and Peter Mayo, *Gramsci and Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

³² Thomas Maak and Nicolas Pless, *Responsible Leadership* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 37-39.

In March 2004, while meeting with the ski-masked Zapatistas of the Caracol of Roberto Barrios, DePaul University students learned something very important. After describing the growing poverty levels in their communities and the reasons for their resistance, they asked us 'not to leave them alone.' These simple and clear words helped the students realize their own social responsibility and the implications that their decisions in Chicago had for the life and struggle of the indigenous people of Chiapas. They realized that the best way for them to help the poor of Chiapas was to commit to socially responsible personal and professional lives as global citizens. They discovered something similar to what Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the notorious defender of the "indios" and the first Bishop of Chiapas, realized five centuries before: that to defend the rights of indigenous people in the New World, his main work was to be found back in his motherland of Spain.³³ Just as Fray Bartolomé stayed in Chiapas only about six months, our students stay only about ten days — but we realize how political and economic decisions in the United States affect the life of indigenous people there. Much as Saint Vincent de Paul, who always supported foreign missions yet spent almost all his life in Paris and France, reminds us of the importance of thinking globally and acting locally, the growing interconnections of our flattening world suggest that study-abroad programs, and experiential international and professional service learning programs, should invite participants to think and act both locally and globally.

³³ Bartolomé de Las Casas and Consuelo Varela, *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1999), 248.